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Fear 'making bloggers, reporters self-censor'

Tue, 11 February 2014 Kevin Ponniah

Cambodian bloggers and journalists often self-censor out of fear that they could face legal or physical threats, the Cambodian Center for Human Rights said in a report on freedom of expression released yesterday.

The policy brief, a summary of six roundtable discussions held over the past two years with bloggers, students, journalists, civil society groups, activists and lawyers, found the state of freedom of expression in Cambodia to be "worryingly fragile".

According to the report, many Cambodian bloggers are reluctant to post commentary online regarding politics, the government or powerful individuals out of fear that they could face arrest or defamation charges.

Journalists, meanwhile, "made it clear that they felt unable to write freely about the [government] or those connected with the [government] due to fear of potential harassment, threats and violence", the report says.

But Kounila Keo, a prominent blogger and media consultant, said there was "some level of misguided apprehension" that a need to self-censor online exists.

"I have been blogging, using Facebook, Twitter and other social media channels for several years and have been vocally critical of government policy and their style of leadership, but [to] date, I have not received any indication that I need to stop," she said.

But Ramana Sorn, the centre's freedom of expression project coordinator, said that the anxiety was warranted.

"There have been many examples in the past of people being targeted for voicing their opinions; harassment of journalists is something that happens very frequently, and most people know that," she said.

While journalists often self-censor, bloggers are less likely to do so given that a proposed cyber-law has yet to be implemented, said media academic Moeun Chhean Nariddh.

"It's unclear whether they will be targeted ... but a good lesson should be learned from the recent prosecution of a Facebook user for [defamatory] comments," he said.

Government spokesman Ek Tha, who went as Ek Madra during his 16 years as a journalist, said that ethical journalists had no reason to be scared.

"They have the right to report the truth on the ground," Tha said.

"They should not be scared; they should not be afraid, because that's what the reader expects when they read the newspaper, watch TV, or listen to radio, they want to hear the facts [and] the truth."

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